

## Duxbury at the Turn of the Century Part II

By CECIL ATWATER

### Some Characters

Concerning strong language: our Duxbury author, Gershom Bradford, in one of his books tells how a little band of missionaries were shocked by the language of an old sea captain.

The boatshop version was slightly different but essentially the same. The missionaries had boarded a packet in Boston destined for Europe and the Far East. The captain, whose profanity was famous was giving orders to the crew to hoist sails, bring in the bang-plank, etc. and was overheard by the man in charge of the missionaries who was greatly shocked by the Captain's colorful assortment of cuss words. When he could stand it no longer he nervously called out, "Please, please sir, do control your language. To which the busy captain replied; "Blankety, blankety, blank, if this bothers you, you're all going to freeze to death before we get to Liverpool." Cuss words flowed from the old timers as innocently as words from a child. It was part of the language of seafaring men. Many of them were deeply religious and their speech meant no disrespect to Burgess who was painting a boat and I heard him singing softly to himself, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, etc." Inadvertently, he upset the paint pail. Out came a stream of oaths that I am sure adjusted the situation to his complete satisfaction.

A frequent visitor to the boatshop was Samuel Hunt, who liked to talk about the old days. One day I was in front of the boatshop when Captain Hunt was in his dory a few yards off shore. He tripped on some gear and sustained a bad fall. I alerted the men in the shop and they hurried to the water's edge and found that the old man had a broken leg. They quickly found a door, placed the captain on it and carried him to his shack a short distance away. When the doctor came he started to cut away the top of the captain's hip boot. The old man protested with mighty oaths and said he was "goin' to use them boots again." He was over 90 at the time but I can bear witness to the fact that he did use those boots again but they were now knee-length. He walked bow-legged after that. He liked to sit in the sun in front of the boatshop where the marine railway entered the building. I often sat with him and listened to his yarns. I recall one drowsy noon when he was droning on with both of us half asleep. I just managed to catch this: "The last time I rounded the Horn there was a flat calm and what wind there was was dead ahead and blowin' like hell."

Mrs. Burgess was a wonderful old lady, much admired by her neighbors. When sitting in a rocking chair, she reminded me of the picture of Whistler's mother. She was strict with Jim and didn't allow him to smoke. Sometimes the boatshop crew played little pranks on each other. Now and then Jim smoked little cheroots surreptitiously. One day when he lighted up, one of the

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teenage boy. His accounts of shore leaves in some of the most boisterous ports of the world were garnished with rather robust incidents for a youngster and spiced with such picturesque language only an old salt would have recognized 11 of the words. Some of his tales were hair-raising (at times I was a bit scared) - I soon came to understand that he was reliving his youth and using the language to which was accustomed in the old days. The shock of finding that my gentle friend had been a ripsnorting, swashbuckling sailorman gradually wore off and I gloried in the thrill of being taken back 50 or 60 years to one of the most interesting periods in the life of our nation. One cold winter morning when he was visiting me, I asked him if he would start at the beginning and give me a detailed account of one of his voyages. Completely unhurried and fortified by his jug, we spent the entire day sailing around the world. A notable port was Shanghai. With several months pay in his pocket, Georgie and his crew mates devoted 2 days and nights in exploring the seamy sections of the great city, their leave made lively by brawls, mostly with the crews of other vessels, brushes with native constabulary and particular attention paid to wine, women and song. Crews usually kept loyally together and when shore leave was about to end all those who were able to navigate led or carried their less mobile companions to the ship. When Georgie awoke the morning after his Shanghai leave, nearly a half year's pay was gone. He said that all he had to show for his leave was a terrific hangover and a dozen skunk traps. Not being aware that a trap had been designed specifically for that animal, I queried Georgie asking if they had some sort of deodorizing attachment but all he could tell me was that the man from whom he bought them said they were skunk traps. That night after he had opened the door and started for home I called after him "What did you do with those skunk traps?" To which he yelled back, "When I got to Manila, I hove'm to hell." Some of you gentle people may conclude that association with this rough old sailorman in his cups was not proper companionship for a boy of tender years. My friendship with Georgie gave me early in life an understanding of many things that prepared me for adult living.

### He Was Serene

As I have said, Georgie was a quiet man and he was well liked at the boatshop. He was greatly admired by his fellow workers because he had acquired some mastery over the handicap of palsy which caused his right hand to shake constantly. Jim Burgess always called on him when a waterline was to be painted, a comparatively difficult task. The moment his brush met the boat's hull his hand was steady and true. When the job was done everyone knocked off for a moment to admire his skill which gave Georgie untold pleasure. Despite his palsy, Georgie used his tools like a master and he was particularly adept in making ship models. He was sometimes offered several hundred dollars for a model but if he didn't particularly like the man who made the offer, usually a summer resident, no amount of money would induce him to sell. It took about a year to complete a model. He was very neat and I never saw his workbench in a cluttered condition. Over his bench hung a little sign "A place for everything and everything in its place."

Youngsters are not always kind and I know I embarrassed him when I mentioned that he had spelled the word "place" 2 different ways, "place" and "plase." He shyly said he had really forgotten how the word should be spelled and decided if he spelled it both ways he couldn't be entirely wrong!

One winter, I got a letter from Georgie saying that he hoped I would come to Duxbury for the Christmas holidays. This was a bit unusual, because I had never received a letter from him before. I had planned a ski trip to New Hampshire with some school friends but, fearing that something might be amiss with my friend, I cancelled the ski trip and went to Duxbury. Going to his cabin, I found him hale and hearty and his greeting was particularly warm. He climbed a little ladder to a space above his room and brought down an oblong shaped box. Putting it on the table, he turned it around and presented me with a beautiful ship model encased in a glass front wooden box. I was overwhelmed. He said he had been working on it off and on for a year and always hid it when he saw me approaching. The model is now on top of a bookcase in our living room. When I look at it, it brings back memories of my treasured friend who long since departed for ethereal shores.

I would like to tell you a bit about the neighborhood in Duxbury with which I was most familiar - Josselyn Ave. and Shipyard Lane. Here all-year residents and summer residents mingled in complete harmony. There were the 4 brothers, Ernest, Herbert and Briggs Wadsworth, and Tom Herrick. Tom was a Wadsworth but had changed his name because an aunt with no progeny had wanted him to carry on her name. Tom was the son of T. Waldo Herrick who endeared himself to our high school boys and girls and for whom their gymnasium was named. He drove one of the school buses. Ernest Wadsworth had been a ship carpenter and had spent much time at sea. He built the magnificent ship model now on display in Sailor's Snug Harbor. And it was Jed Hill, builder, who, I found, was an expert in identifying birds. Sam Burgess, not a close relative of Jim Burgess, lived directly across the street from Him. Sam was a rugged individualist. He set his lobster pots off the Gurnet and only a hurricane would have stopped him from pulling them. He was a master at navigating the narrow bay channels at low tide. So far as I know, Sam was the source of the only scandal in our neighborhood. I must whisper it: "Sam lived alone with a housekeeper." The proper ladies of our community looked at her askance and always referred to her as "Sam Burgess's woman." She seldom appeared outside the house. I chanced to meet her and talked with her one day. I thought she was gentle and soft spoken. There were others but I don't want to burden this narrative with too many names.

Each summer, our neighborhood organized an outing to the Gurnet. In a half dozen or so sailboats, towing dories, we sailed across the bay and anchored off Gurnet Creek. Rowing up the creek, we landed and had a clambake. We stayed over low tide which gave opportunity to visit the lighthouse. The more strenuous walked to Saquish and back. Some of the dunes were quite high and it was fun to slide down them. One of our party told of a trip to the dunes that he had made many

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Provincetown the day before they laid the cornerstone of the Provincetown Monument and had the thrilling experience of hearing Pres. Theodore Roosevelt give his dedicatory address. I say thrilling because Teddy was one of my heroes and still is.

I would like to tell you about a project to which I devoted several summers. I shipped a 17-foot canvas canoe to Duxbury and set myself to the task of exploring all the rivers and small streams that flowed into Duxbury, Kingston and Plymouth bays. I had 3 different companions during the 3 summers. Towing the canoe, we sailed the "Bub" to the mouth of the stream we had selected for the day. Anchoring the sailboat, we paddled the canoe up the stream until the water became so shallow we could go no farther. It was really fun and we never knew exactly where we were and where we would wind up. Most streams flowing into Duxbury Bay, such as Blue Fish River, soon petered out. Helen Wadsworth was my companion on most of the Duxbury Bay trips. I am sure some of you will remember her. She was a beautiful girl and I was proud to squire her to dances here and in Boston where she later went to work. She was the daughter of Seaborn Wadsworth who, as the name implies, was born at sea. We paddled through the marshes to Green Harbor and Brant Rock and once followed Duck Hill River until we could go no farther.

Another companion was Walter Amesbury, with whom I made a trip up Jones River, Kingston, to its source. We carried camping equipment and it took several days. The tidal part of the river was easy because we rode the incoming tide. Even the fresh water section had good depth and it took us deep into the country. To our surprise and delight, we found the source of the river was Silver Lake. At that time there were no summer

years before with his girl friend and another couple. You who are nautically knowledgeable will know that a wide rather flat bottomed boat is sometimes referred to as having a pumpkin seed hull. One of the girls made the men casually remarked, "Why, Jim, here comes Mrs. Burgess." Greatly alarmed, Jim took the lighted cheroot from his mouth and thrust it into his hip pocket. He was relieved to find that Mrs. Burgess was not coming, but he had one devil of a time explaining to her how he had burned a hole in his trousers. These men had a good time together. They also had a considerable amount of personal dignity. One Sunday, I was in the Burgess parlor when a voice from the street called, "Jim, Jim," accompanied by the blowing of an automobile horn. Jim peeked through the window and saw that it was one of his wealthy yacht customers. At first he paid no attention but when the summons was repeated he got up, opened the door and shouted: "Mr. X, stop tootin' that horn. If you want to see me, come to the door, knock proper, and I'll open it. And another thing, I've got a handle to my name, I'm Mr. Burgess to you." Much mollified, Mr. X came to the door, apologized and discussed his errand. Jim bought his first car, a Ford, when he was over 80. He was timid about driving it. On his first ride after taking delivery, he asked me to go with him. He was slow and cautious, and when we came to the first intersection, he stopped the car leaving the motor running, hopped out, ran briskly to where he could see both ways, saw no vehicle in sight, dashed back to the car and drove across with a big smile. After that, when we had to cross a street, I was the one that got out and gave the signal that all was clear. When he was so old that he was confined to his house, he told me that his greatest regret in departing this world would be his inability to see what great changes would take place in the next century. He was a wonderful old man and I loved him like a 3rd grandfather.

**His Best Friend**

Perhaps my most intimate friend at the boatshop was George Freeman, called Georgie. He lived in a cabin behind the house of his sisters on Washington St. Georgie, as a young man, had sailed before the mast to far places of the world and his cabin was filled with old charts, boat models, ship pictures, his sea chest, relics of wrecks that he had picked up mostly on Cape Cod, and mementoes of his voyages. It was a veritable treasure house, and I spent many happy hours there. To me, Georgie was a fascinating person. If you had met him coming down the street, you surely would not have ranked him as a person of distinction, but to me his adventures in strange lands made him a man in the Herman Melville tradition, and I felt fortunate in having him for a friend. So keen was I to be with Georgie that I often spent my Christmas holidays in Duxbury. During his boyhood, the men of Duxbury had built ships along our shores and it was the most natural thing in the world for the young bucks to sign on for long voyages. With a wood fire in our kitchen stove, I invited Georgie to visit men and spend the day. This he did several times. Soon after the winter sun came up over the Bay, I would thrill with anticipation when I saw him trudge through the snow to our back door. His coat always bulged in front for he tried, not to successfully, to conceal a gallon jug that held his rum. I do not know how full the jug was when he first arrived but I know it was empty when he left. I never saw Georgie really drunk, but the rum, taken in little nips every few minutes throughout the day, lubricated both his memory and his tongue. To my delight, he apparently forgot that he was talking to a slide with dispatch but the other who carried much more poundage could scarcely get going. She appealed to the men asking, "Why can't I slide like Mary?" She was told, "You're pumpkin seed. Mary's Clipper bottom!"

I recall with much pleasure some cruising I did in Massachusetts Bay. A big event in those waters was the arrival of the New York Yacht Club fleet at Marblehead. My little 15-footer was not much of an ocean going craft, so I had to avoid bad weather. One time, with a companion, I started for Marblehead at 9 pm. We went out of the Bay with the tide rounded the Gurnet and set a compass course for Minot's Light. From there we set our course for the Graves Light, which is far off Boston Harbor. We were off Graves at dawn where we picked up a brisk southerly breeze and rounded Marblehead Neck at noon. Some of you yachtsmen will remember the German Sonderklass boats. I saw them race for the first time in this country the afternoon of our arrival in Marblehead. We made many more short voyages including Gloucester and Cape Cod harbors. We sailed to

cottages there or other signs of civilization. We camped on a high bank under some stately pines. Eel River, Plymouth, was a beautiful trip. Helen Irwin, whose family was prominent in Duxbury, was my companion. Some will remember her as the charming young lady who played the piano at Mattakesett Hall in the days of the silent movies. The Eel River trip took us into the Standish Forest.

I once asked Percy Walker if he knew the site of the original Myles Standish house. He said it was on the north side of Kingston Bay at the foot of Captain's Hill.

He also said the shore was dense with small trees, bushes and brambles and that an old record mentioned a large boulder adjacent to the cellar hole. He thought no one had been in there in modern times. This was somewhat of a challenge, so Helen Irwin and I set out to find it. We tackled the problem from the Bay side making probes into the dense brush. As you know, the land has been cleared, markers placed, and a pleasant little park established.

I want to mention an old timer well known to some of you. I refer to Parker Hall who, without a crew, sailed a sizeable schooner along the Atlantic Coast taking cargoes from port to port. He was a remarkable sailor, because a schooner as large as his would ordinarily have 4 or 5 men to work on it. My father and I were fishing off the lumber yard one day when we paid Captain Hall a visit. He greeted us cordially and invited us aboard. After we got acquainted, my father expressed surprise that he made his voyages alone and said, "Captain, you must get awfully lonely. Why don't you get a wife?" Captain Hall said, "Had a wife once, but she warn't no good. She couldn't steer, wanted butter on her bread and wouldn't eat beans. No, she warn't no good at all."